

BASIL RIBBONS (1926–2017)



Basil Ribbons

Basil Ribbons was a botanist at the University of Glasgow and a mainstay of the Committee for the Study of the Scottish Flora (CSSF) in the 1960s and 1970s. His active involvement with the BSBI appears to have finished when that Committee was wound up in 1978, although he remained a member until his death.

Basil was born on 21st May 1926 and educated at the City of Norwich School, Norwich. He went on to study at Queen Mary College, University of London, graduating in 1947 with a B.Sc. in Botany. He held a postgraduate studentship there from 1947 to 1949, when he joined the University of Glasgow as an assistant lecturer in the Botany Department. He was promoted to lecturer in 1952, working part-time from 1984. He remained with the University until his retirement in 1988.

Basil was a keen field botanist from his student days. He visited the Isles of Scilly with Peter Wanstall (also of Queen Mary College) in 1948, where Miss A.D. Tiddy, a retired teacher on St Agnes, gave him a copy of C.A. Johns' *A week at the Lizard* (*BSBI News*, 30: 26, 1982). On a later visit, in 1950, he found a clump of *Acanthus mollis* (Bear's-breech) on St Agnes which might have persisted for at least a century (Ribbons, 1953). In 1953, he joined Bob and Esther Mackechnie and Ted

Wallace for a fortnight's tour of Ireland which took them from Kerry to Donegal (Wallace, 1979). He joined the BSBI in 1949 and became the Vice-County Recorder for Stirlingshire (v.c.86) in 1953, resigning in 1980; he was also the Recorder for neighbouring West Perthshire (v.c.87) from 1956 to 1969. While at Glasgow, Basil was a popular and respected lecturer and his field courses were enjoyed by the students (who nevertheless mimicked his Norfolk accent, examining plants with their 'spoi glaass' rather than their hand lens). He also led a popular field botany course for the Extra-mural Department, generally running from April through to summer, with excursions often every Wednesday and further afield at weekends. These excursions, along with others with local botanists, resulted in a comprehensive coverage of the local flora between 1957 and 1987. His efforts were particularly noteworthy in Renfrewshire (v.c.76), where he produced a map showing the many 1-km squares visited and lists of excursions with dates and recorder initials. He collaborated with the Recorder, Robert Mackechnie, and later Elizabeth Conacher, and together they generated many hundreds of field record cards. These were made available to the *Atlas of the British Flora* (1962), and later over 33,000 records were entered into the database for the recent *The Flora of Renfrewshire* (Watson, 2013). Following a request for information on earlier recording in Renfrewshire, he replied by letter in 2008, with helpful comments on his former activities, offering enthusiastic support and commenting that he was 'delighted that all the recording we did is being made use of'. He was also relieved to hear that the Glasgow (GL) herbarium had survived the disastrous fire that occurred at the Botany Department in 2001.

The Committee for the Study of the Scottish Flora (CSSF) was set up in 1953 to co-ordinate the activities of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh and the BSBI in Scotland, with each society appointing an equal number of members to the committee. In 1953, B.L. Burt was appointed its Chairman and Basil its Secretary. He remained Secretary until 1962 and was re-appointed in 1969 (Ribbons, 1976a), staying in post until the Committee ceased to exist in 1978. He contributed lengthy reports on CSSF field meetings to Caithness in 1972, a meeting marked by a visit to the Queen Mother at Castle of Mey (Ribbons, 1973), Italy and Austria in 1970 (Ribbons, 1972), Lapland in 1973 (Ribbons, 1974)

and Poland in 1976 (Ribbons, 1979).

By 1976, the partnership which had established the CSSF was under strain. Some members outside the Glasgow-Edinburgh belt felt rather isolated, and the formidable Mary McCallum Webster raised this criticism at the BSBI AGM at Dumfries in 1975 (Briggs, 1976; Brookes, 1979). Although the Botanical Society of Edinburgh supported the CSSF (Ribbons, 1976b), a vote of the Scottish members of the BSBI rejected the status quo (Briggs, 1977). The CSSF was replaced by the current (and highly successful) BSBI Committee for Scotland, and the *BSBI Scottish Newsletter* was established to tackle the communication problem. The divorce must have been rather acrimonious, as ill-feeling was still lingering in the early 1980s when C.D.P. first attended the Scottish Exhibition Meeting. Whether the CSSF would have lasted longer with a more emollient and unifying figure as secretary will never be known; we are told that Basil sometimes came across as pernickety and legalistic. Most of his contributions to the BSBI's publications had been made on behalf of CSSF, and with its demise they more or less ceased. He was, however, the BSBI's nominated expert on Scottish vice-county boundaries from 1979 to 1988 (cf. Ribbons, 1961).

Basil's publications characteristically reported new plant records, often with a detailed survey of the relevant earlier literature. He documented the rediscovery of *Homogyne alpina* (Purple Colt's-foot) in Scotland by Alf Slack (Ribbons, 1952) and his presidential address to the Andersonian Naturalists, delivered in 1964, but not published until much later (Ribbons, 1976c), was a detailed survey of British *Ledum* [*Rhododendron*] *groenlandicum* (Labrador-tea) records. He edited the *Glasgow Naturalist* from 1964 to 1976. He also contributed 718 specimens to the Glasgow University herbarium (GL), now held by Glasgow Museums (GLAM). Most of these are from Scotland, especially Wester Ross (v.c.105, 260 specimens), but they cover a wide range of localities in England (especially West Cornwall and Teesdale), Wales and western Ireland. The genus with most specimens is *Empetrum* (68 specimens, including 48 of *E. nigrum* ssp. *hermaphroditum* (Crowberry)). He also took an active part in university life and he was the Honorary Secretary of the Glasgow Association of University Teachers (GUAT) from c. 1960, becoming its President in 1964.

Following his retirement from Glasgow he moved to Dorset. In a letter of 2008, he related that he was doing

'pretty well for an old 'un', adding that he hadn't done any British botanising since he retired, but he noted that he made walking trips to France and north-east Italy each year, adding 'of course I don't ignore the plants I walk past'. With his retirement to Dorset he acquired a garden where he 'transferred his interest to garden plants'. He later moved to Norwich where he died on 1st January 2017, aged 90.

Much of the factual information in this obituary is taken from the online catalogue of the University of Glasgow Archive. We thank Jim Dickson, Roger Downie, Gwynn Ellis, Alison Moss, Bill Stewart and Richard Weddle for help in preparing this obituary.

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